

Preventing and Dealing with Problem Behavior

Partially adapted from materials compiled by Nancy Grimes

Four Assumptions about Behavior

Behavior is purposeful.

- ⇒ In general, all behaviors have some reason or function for occurring. The most common functions of behavior are to obtain something or to avoid something or someone. What complicates this process is that the same behavior can be used for both. If the purpose of the behavior can be identified, the youth can be taught a new, socially acceptable response to obtain the same results.

Behavior is learned.

- ⇒ We know that youth learn inappropriate or maladaptive behaviors. Conversely, they can also be taught and learn more appropriate behaviors.

Behavior is predictable.

- ⇒ Youth establish patterns of behavior and part of the analysis should be to evaluate the past. Anticipating behavior problems in the environment demands knowledge of and familiarity with the patterns of the particular youth's behavior.

Behavior is interactive.

- ⇒ Look at the way both adults and peers react to the behavior. They may, inadvertently, be reinforcing the behavior and be part of the problem.

Changing Your Attitudes and Behavior

It's important to remember that your attitude and behavior towards youth will be reflected back at you. The expectations you have of youth – whether high or low – will usually be what you get. Changing your attitudes (thinking of youth as needy instead of bad) and your behaviors (be positive rather than punitive) can often make the biggest difference when working with youth.

Be aware that your perceptions of a youth are probably being communicated to her/him. If you believe that s/he can accomplish the task at hand no matter how hard the struggle, they will see that. If you think that they can't, they will see that as well. It's communicated, often unconsciously, in our body language, voice, and actions. Pay attention to your perceptions. Change the ones that are obstacles to being creative, optimistic, and supportive toward your youth.

5 Steps to Improving Problem Behavior

- ⇒ Do not expect to change all of a youth's problem behaviors at once. Target one behavior at a time.
- ⇒ Work with the youth to set a behavior goal that he/she can achieve.
- ⇒ Describe, model, and practice what you expect from the youth.
- ⇒ Speak to the youth positively.
- ⇒ Develop a plan for improving the misbehavior in a calm setting that is away from other youth.

Using Positive Language with Youth

- ⇒ **Ask "what" questions.** "What did you do? What are you going to do about it?"
- ⇒ **Give reminders.** "Remember only one person should speak at a time."
- ⇒ **Give a compliment first.** "You're great with words; I know you can use appropriate language."
- ⇒ **Let the youth choose consequences.** "Would a reminder or a phone call home be best for you?"
- ⇒ **Step back and stay calm.** "Let's stay calm. I don't want anyone to get into trouble for fighting."
- ⇒ **Use positive questions.** "I'd like it if you used more appropriate language. How can I help you with that?"
- ⇒ **Notice improvements in behavior.** "Thank you for choosing your words so well."

Consequences for Misbehavior

Consequences should be logical, reasonable, and appropriate. Whenever possible, the youth should be involved in deciding what the consequence will be. Consequences should be immediate and consistent for that particular youth.

The Four Mistaken Goals of Misbehavior

Mistaken Goal	Instinctive Belief	Behavior	Strategies to Use
Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ I count only when I'm being noticed or getting special treatment. ⇒ I'm only important when I'm keeping you busy with me. ⇒ I belong only when you pay constant attention to me. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Acting goofy. ⇒ Putting on a show. ⇒ Being louder than anyone else. ⇒ Extremes of any behavior or appearance. ⇒ Making wise-cracks. ⇒ Seeking approval constantly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Greet the youth every day. ⇒ Have short conversations with them unrelated to CE. ⇒ Use the youth's name when speaking. Only use it in a positive way. ⇒ Recognize and praise positive steps in behavior. ⇒ Stand nearby without being intrusive. ⇒ Create a small task or job for the youth. ⇒ Thank the youth for the behaviors you want to increase. ⇒ Have the youth take on leadership roles. ⇒ Make eye contact and smile at the youth. ⇒ Teach ways of getting attention in a positive manner. ⇒ Ignore misbehaviors. Notice positive behaviors. ⇒ Give praise for the absence of misbehavior. ⇒ Do the unexpected to get the attention of the group on you. ⇒ Thank other youth for exhibiting behavior you want to see.
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ I belong only when I'm in control. ⇒ My life is out of my control so I'll take control anywhere I can. ⇒ I'm not going to let you control me like everyone else does. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Arguing. ⇒ Defiance. ⇒ Oppositional behavior. ⇒ Challenging authority figures. ⇒ Aggressiveness and threats. ⇒ "You can't make me." ⇒ "You're not the boss of me." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Give genuine choices. These can include: choosing among different activities to do, choice to refuse an activity, choice of number of people to work with, choice of location. ⇒ Provide leadership opportunities. ⇒ Create a job or task for youth that doesn't rotate to others. ⇒ Problem-solve the situation with the youth and review choices. ⇒ If the boundary was not established ahead of time, let the behavior pass without consequence. Establish the boundary for the future. ⇒ Avoid power struggles and make a graceful exit if you cannot avoid one. Ask twice for what you want, and then get out. You can say that you changed your mind. ⇒ Require restitution (apology, repair, replacement).

Revenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ I don't think I belong so I'll hurt others as I feel hurt. ⇒ I feel good only if I hurt back. ⇒ I can't be liked or loved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Arguing. ⇒ Defiance. ⇒ Oppositional behavior. ⇒ Challenging authority figures. ⇒ Aggressiveness and threats, sometimes up to weeks or months after the initial incident. ⇒ "I don't get mad; I get even." ⇒ "You'll pay for that." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ The strategies are the same as they are for Power-based youth. With both of these mistaken goals, youth feel out of control in their lives. They need genuine choices so they feel like they have some control.
Learned Helplessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ I don't belong because I'm not perfect. ⇒ I'll convince others of how helpless I am so they won't expect anything of me. ⇒ I am unable to succeed at anything. ⇒ It's no use trying because I won't do it right anyway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Complaining. ⇒ Whining. ⇒ Frequent trips outside of learning environment. ⇒ Poor attendance. ⇒ Perfectionism. ⇒ Victim behavior. ⇒ "It's too hard." ⇒ "I can't." ⇒ "I'm stupid." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Begin each day with an easy success. ⇒ Take one small step at a time. ⇒ Require two "put-ups" for every put-down. ⇒ Teach and encourage the use of positive self-talk before beginning tasks. ⇒ Create an on-going list of skills the youth has learned. ⇒ Notice the youth's contributions. ⇒ Equate mistakes with effort. ⇒ Acknowledge the difficulty of the task. ⇒ Teach and encourage the use of positive self-praise after the completion of a task. ⇒ Remind the youth of past successes.

Challenging Group Situations

Adapted from the Northwest Leader Corps curriculum.

Group energy or attention wanes or group is unresponsive.

Key signs are low participation, less passion or energy in conversations, and non-verbal cues such as staring off or physical withdrawal. Things to try:

- ⇒ Ask what is going on.
- ⇒ Provide descriptive feedback on what you see and ask why.
- ⇒ Increase your own energy or pacing; alter voice tone.
- ⇒ Take a short break.
- ⇒ Check in with the group to see if what is being done is helpful.
- ⇒ Ask the group what they would like to do.
- ⇒ Have the group do something physical such as an energizer. (Make sure to adapt as needed for physical ability.)

Group keeps going off-topic.

May be happening because other (personal) agendas are present, group members are having difficulty with the task, or they disagree with the focus or style. Things to try:

- ⇒ Refer the group back to the focus.
- ⇒ Ask if they feel the current discussion is helpful or necessary.
- ⇒ Point out the behavior and ask for more understanding about why it's happening.
- ⇒ Be aware that there may be power dynamics present that affect involvement.
- ⇒ Ask what is going on.
- ⇒ Take a short break.

Only part of the group is participating.

Factors that can contribute to this include: topic is only relevant to some, participants may be intimidated for various reasons, power barriers may be keeping some members from expressing themselves, quiet members are checked out, or conversely, may be attentively processing in their own style. Things to try:

- ⇒ Ask if others would like to share.
- ⇒ Structure the session so everyone gets to talk.
- ⇒ Point out that only some are speaking and inquire for more understanding.
- ⇒ During a break gently ask quiet members how they are doing and if they need anything in the session.
- ⇒ Assess whether the current conversation is important or can be shifted to something more relevant.